



## Testimony to the Education Committee of the Missouri State Senate

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Chairman Pearce, Vice-Chairman Rupp, members of the committee: It's an honor to be with you today. My name is Mike Petrilli; I'm the executive vice president of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, a right-of-center education policy think tank in Washington, DC that also does on the ground work in the great state of Ohio. We promote education reforms of all stripes, with a particular focus on school choice and standards-based reform. I was honored to serve in the George W. Bush Administration; my boss, Chester Finn, served in the Reagan Administration. Perhaps most importantly, I was raised right here in Missouri, in Chesterfield, and attended public schools in the Parkway School District.

I suspect that not all of my friends agree with me, but I am glad that you are holding this hearing and debating the issue of whether Missouri should stick with the Common Core. These standards were developed by the states, and to be successful, they need to be owned by the states. Our educators are all too familiar with the "flavor of the month"—reforms that come and go. They are wondering if they should wait this one out too. By having this open debate on the Common Core you can settle the issue once and for all, and either change course or move full speed ahead.

I am here today to urge you to stay the course with the Common Core, for four reasons:

1. First, the Common Core State Standards are significantly stronger than the Missouri standards they replaced.
2. Second, you have already invested time and money into implementing the new standards. They have momentum. Calling for a do-over would waste the millions of man hours already invested—and potentially cost the state of Missouri more money than proceeding with the Common Core.
3. Third, it's doubtful that returning to your old standards would put Missouri on a path toward higher student achievement. Regrettably, over the past two decades, Missouri has made some of the smallest gains in the country on the National Assessment of Educational Progress. You need a different way forward.
4. Fourth, if you decide to opt out of the Common Core, you will be opting Missouri's teachers and students out of an opportunity to participate in the incredible wave of innovation that these standards are unleashing. It's as if the whole world is moving to smart phones and tablets while you're sticking with a rotary.

Let me say more about each point. First, though, let me acknowledge that Common Core critics raise at least one legitimate concern. They are right that President Obama politicized the standards by using federal Race to the Top dollars to coerce their adoption by the states. It doesn't help that the president took credit for the common standards every time he had a chance on the campaign trail, and did it again in his recent State of the Union address. These standards started out as state standards, and they need to remain state standards. Washington needs to butt out.

### **The Common Core Standards are Very Strong**

For more than fifteen years, we at Fordham have been evaluating state academic standards. We come to the task from a relatively traditional perspective. We believe in the importance of solid academic content—of students being expected to master a body of knowledge and skills. In English, for example, we want young students to master phonics and older students to study important works of literature. In math, we think young children should know their times tables and older students should be on a path to college-level calculus.

Yet, regrettably, most states—including Missouri—failed to put such solid expectations in place. In our most recent review of state standards, in 2010, the Show Me State's standards earned lowly Ds for both English and mathematics. About the English standards, our reviewers wrote:

The Missouri ELA standards include some important K-12 content. Unfortunately, this content is buried among vaguely worded and repetitive standards that fail to provide the kinds of content-rich expectations that teachers need to plan robust, college-prep curricula, instruction, and assessment.

More specifically:

Missouri fails to include examples of texts, discussion of text difficulty, samples of texts or authors, including any mention of foundational works of American literature or any other information that would help educators ensure that they are teaching progressively rigorous texts across grade levels.

And about Missouri's math standards, our reviewers wrote that they "are well presented and organized, but the statements are often very broad and difficult to interpret. In K-8, arithmetic is covered reasonably well, but not sufficiently prioritized. In high school, the standards are vague and do not cover some essential content."

The Common Core standards, on the other hand, earned honors grades from our reviewers—an A-minus for mathematics and a B-plus for English. The math standards are particularly strong in the elementary grades, with a heavy focus on basic arithmetic and fractions. And the English standards expect students to read a demanding sequence of texts, including great works of American literature and the country's founding documents.

Missouri raised the bar dramatically when it adopted the Common Core. Why lower it again?

## Maintain the Momentum

As I'm sure you'll hear several times this afternoon, Missouri educators are already hard at work implementing the standards: Engaging in professional development, developing new curricular resources, vetting textbooks, and so forth. Changing horses in the middle the race would be incredibly disruptive.

It might also be very expensive. You've probably heard from the Pioneer Institute about its cost estimate of Common Core implementation. We at Fordham commissioned a similar cost estimate, and it reached many of the same conclusions. Implementation will not be free, particular if it is to be meaningful. But it need not break the bank either. And because you've already been moving toward the Common Core, many of the hard costs have already been sunk.

In our study, we looked at three cost levels for implementation:

- **Business as Usual.** This "traditional" approach to implementation means buying hard-copy textbooks, administering paper student assessments annually, and delivering in-person professional development to all teachers.
- **Bare Bones.** This is the lowest-cost alternative, employing open-source materials, annual computer-administered assessments, and online professional development via webinars and modules.
- **Balanced Implementation.** This is a mix of approaches, some of which may be more effective than others while also reducing costs. It uses a blend of instructional materials (e.g., teacher self-published texts and/or district-produced materials), both interim and summative assessments, and a hybrid system of professional development (e.g., train-the-trainers).

As expected, cost projections vary widely, depending on the approach chosen. We estimate that for Missouri, *Business as Usual* costs roughly \$280 million, *Bare Bones* roughly \$70 million, and *Balanced Implementation* roughly \$120 million.

But note that Missouri is *already spending significant sums every year* on instructional materials, assessment, and professional development. Can much of that be repurposed as you move to the Common Core? We think so.

We estimate that Missouri already spends about \$89 million annually on these activities. So if you subtract that amount from our estimates for Common Core implementation, you get much more modest estimates of the true additional costs of the Common Core. For *Business as Usual* (the most expensive approach) it's about \$190 million, for *Balanced Implementation* it's \$26 million, and for *Bare Bones* you could actually *save* \$21 million by moving to the Common Core.

## Spur Student Achievement

Another reason to stay the course with the Common Core—perhaps the most important reason—is to raise student achievement. I can't guarantee that—it depends on aggressive implementation at the local level. But I can tell you that what you were doing before Common Core wasn't working.

According to an analysis by Eric Hanushek, Ludger Woessmann and Paul Peterson, Missouri was toward the back of the pack when it came to test score gains on the National Assessment of Educational Progress in reading, math, and science from the early 1990s until today.



Moving to the Common Core gives you the opportunity to combine strong standards with much higher expectations for passing state tests. This pressure—the kind that we’ve seen in states like Massachusetts that have made big gains on the NAEP—can go a long way.

**Join the Online Revolution**

Finally, staying the course with the Common Core gives you the opportunity to take advantage of the huge amount of investment that other states, private foundations, and private companies are putting into Common Core-aligned textbooks, e-books, professional development, online learning, and on and on. As Tom Vander Ark, a onetime Common Core skeptic, argued recently, the standards have unleashed “an avalanche of innovation.” Simply put, online learning is coming; it’s going to open up a world of choices for students and families; and it’s going to be aligned to the Common Core, not to separate state standards. Do you want Missouri’s students and educators to be a part of that, or not?

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As with all public policy decisions, there are trade-offs and risks associated with adoption of the Common Core. To be sure, you had excellent standards in place before the Common Core came along.

And by all means, the federal government has been heavy handed with this reform, and deserves to be chastened. But don't let your frustration with President Obama lead you to lash out at the kids of Missouri. All things considered, the Common Core is the smartest path forward. That should be the only consideration. Thank you.